

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian Connections



What this book is not: it is not a comprehensive overview of Nigerian literature. That would better be left to a professional scholar of literature, probably a Nigerian.¹ It is rather a set of personal essays on various topics and themes in Nigerian writing as I have encountered it, following it rather unsystematically, over a little more than half a century, as part of a more general fascination with Africa's largest, very diverse country. My visits to Nigeria spread over four decades, although not over a more recent period.² When I did not get there, I kept watching it from a distance. Yet, inevitably, this is the view of an expat—greeted as an *oyinbo* in some parts of the country, a *bature* in others (both meaning “Whiteman!”).

At one time or other, I have visited much of Nigeria, from Lagos to Maiduguri—traveling by rental car, shared taxi, bus, rail, Armel's old combined goods/passenger trucks, or whatever. I had a look at the site of what was to become the new capital of Abuja before it was built; what had been old Abuja had just been renamed Suleija. Most of my time in the country, however, involved several stays in Kafanchan, a town that had developed around a railway junction close to the geographical center of the country, where I conducted field research as an anthropologist during several periods in the 1970s and 1980s. It shows up in various places in the book, but especially in chapter 14. (From Kafanchan, too, various errands would take me now and then to the two nearest metropolises, Jos and Kaduna.)

Townpeople's Horizons

My studies in Kafanchan were planned to be primarily a project in urban anthropology, itself an emergent research field at a time when most anthropologists still chose villages for field sites. A natural focus

was the relationship between ethnic diversity and the division of labor. The town was composed as a sort of Nigeria in miniature.³ It had considerable numbers of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, Nigeria's three largest ethnic groups, but also many others of some twenty groups from near and far. There were only two long-term expatriate residents, an Irish priest at the Roman Catholic mission, and at the small hospital a Hungarian doctor in exile. (This was the time of the Cold War.) I saw little of either of them. But I met with railway workers, market traders, teachers, artisans, office workers, and others—once or twice even with the Emir of Jemaa, whose residence was in Kafanchan.

This all would have been basically a local study. I did that—but serendipity is part of field work, and things happened that made me shift my interests to a certain extent. Some of my new acquaintances among the townspeople saw me as a potential resource person, a gatekeeper to a wider world. One of them suggested that we go into the import-export business together—and as the Nigerian oil export economy was booming at the time, bringing about a certain modest affluence at least in some circles, he clearly had importing fairly sophisticated consumer goods in mind. Another suggested that I take this bright, promising young relative of his along when I left, and put him into my university overseas . . . so he could then come back and become prosperous and powerful, an asset to his kinspeople. To begin with, I usually embarrassedly changed the subject, but gradually I realized that this was where at least some of the story was: this dusty town around the rail tracks was part of a wider world, in fact and in the townspeople's imagination.

Then I began to think, too, about the young urban popular culture. For one thing, the music I heard blaring from the loudspeakers of small record shops (this was still the time of vinyl records) was sometimes from elsewhere in the world—Jamaican reggae, North American televangelists, the soul music I had also heard in Black Washington where I had previously done field work—but in large part was a new West African popular music where traditional African songs and instruments met and mixed creatively with styles, technologies, and organizational forms from far away. Here were the sounds of highlife, juju, Afro-beat. And this came together with my readings of Nigerian fiction: Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe . . .

This was a pioneer generation in modern Nigerian writing. Tutuola's writings went back to the depths of storytelling in his Yoruba culture (but did not only do that). Ekwensi's best-known early work depicted vibrant contemporary city life. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, still undoubtedly the most famous, widely read Nigerian novel, depicted the

coming of colonialism to Igbo society.⁴ My engagement with Nigerian literature in this book starts here, in the writings of the 1950s and 1960s, also a period of transition from late colonialism to postcolonialism. Yet these and other writings could also look even further into the past, back to when there was yet no such entity as Nigeria in these West African lands.

The Creativity of Global Connections

By the time I got to Kafanchan, the tendency among academics and other intellectuals back in Europe and North America was fairly generally to assume that increasing global interconnectedness would necessarily involve homogenization, greater uniformity—a loss of a large part of the world’s cultural diversity. That had been an ingredient in much modernization theory prevalent in the mid-twentieth-century social sciences, and it was still there but took on another form in radical critiques of “cultural imperialism” a couple of decades or so later.

But that was not what I saw. Cultural diversity was alive and well, although taking on some new forms. So I attempted to draw together descriptive materials of an emergent, vibrant West African town life, through observations and interviews. Yet I also wondered what might be an effective, coherent overall conceptualization of the long-distance cultural structures and processes I now found reaching into Kafanchan. At the time, the term “globalization” really had not yet entered the public vocabulary—as a keyword, it was hardly present before the 1990s.⁵ Yet when it appeared and spread, it turned out that it, too, could be taken to mean more uniformity, and that it tended to be used to emphasize market expansion, rather than to cover the wider range of forms of growing interconnectedness.

As I returned to my academic base and still thought about this, I learned that a few colleagues here and there in the world, who were also trying to make sense of the cultural orders and processes of their time, had found useful analogies in what linguists had been saying about Creole languages—and that attracted me, not least as I had had Creolist colleagues in the sociolinguistic project I had earlier worked with in Washington.⁶ Creole languages, occurring in various parts of the world, were mixed forms, with historical roots in two or more languages meeting in a contact situation. But they had developed into something more than limited contact languages. They had become complete languages, mother tongues for people who could conduct their entire speaking lives within them. And at the same time, they

often remained in touch with the languages out of which they had grown—not least the standard, prestige form of some language based in one of the metropolises of the world. Creole languages bore the mark of the colonial situations of the past, and the postcolonial center-periphery relationships that followed them into the present.

As with language, it could be argued, so to a considerable degree with culture. So I saw the lively cultural diversity of Kafanchan, in its openness to the world, in terms of a creolizing cultural process, which I felt had its parallels, with variations on the theme, in many parts of the world.⁷ This was obviously in contrast to that scenario of an inevitable, final global cultural uniformity, but it was also a move away from that old tradition in anthropology that had been inclined to see global cultural diversity as a sort of “global mosaic,” where local societies and cultures were understood to have hard edges, clear boundaries.

As we were getting toward the end of the twentieth century, the interest in new culture emerging through cultural openness and mixture came to be reflected in a wider intellectual vocabulary of partly overlapping terms: apart from “creolization,” they include “hybridity,” “crossover,” “fusion,” “synergy.” To a degree, they had their homes in different academic disciplines and involved different emphases. But they all did suggest that cultures had permeable boundaries, if they had boundaries at all; and again, openness did not result in the end of diversity.

The use of “creolization” and related terms comparatively, in many world contexts, has been debated—as often happens when a notion historically rooted in some particular region is turned into a traveling concept. Some would prefer not to take matters “Creole” out of the Caribbean, as others have objected to taking “caste” out of India.⁸ This matters less to us here.

Back, however, to the Kafanchan townspeople’s imagination, which first provoked me to begin to think seriously about forms and implications of global interconnectedness. As I listened to, and participated in, casual conversations, and also as I reflected on the variety of Nigerian writings from all over, I found a preoccupation with the world outside—probably not among the mass of Nigerians who make their living more directly from the land, but among townspeople and city dwellers, and among people with more or less schooling experience.

Horizons fairly habitually stretched beyond city limits, beyond the country’s borders. A central social type in mid-twentieth-century Nigerian English was the *bintu*, “been-to,” the person who had been

overseas (most often to the United Kingdom, which was, or had recently been, the colonial power) and had returned. In Kafanchan, real-life been-tos must have been very few and far between. I knew only one, a Yoruba petty entrepreneur who had had some technical training in Germany but was better known locally as a freelance street preacher for a revivalist Christian group. Yet in the collective imagination they were well represented. They showed up in Nigerian fiction, too—chapter 7 offers examples. If the been-to was somewhere fairly close to the metropolitan end of a Creole cultural continuum, at its other end was the derogatory epithet “bush,” used to label what was unsophisticated, uncouth. Yet there could be some ambivalence here, since it was also possible in some moments to show certain nostalgic sentiments for the innocence of old-style village life.

Soon enough, with the beginnings of serious Nigerian media research, I would also learn that while the American *Dallas* series was soon everywhere, the most popular sitcom series were those produced locally.⁹ (This was already in the days before Nollywood, the now flourishing Nigerian film industry.) And much of the earthy humor of these series was generated in depictions of local responses to metropolitan influences. Often enough they showed people making fools of themselves as they embraced alien cultural items, and made inept use of them. In the *Masquerade* series at one point, a local chief, invited to try a new dish, stared at the spaghetti and asked what were the worms on his plate.

Nigeria and the World, in Time

By 2020, the cover story of a U.S. newsweekly could forecast that Nigeria was “The World’s Next Superpower” (Hill 2020). In various ways, the country increasingly draws global attention. But for a much longer time, it has been Nigeria—or at least many Nigerians, or people in the past whom we would now see as the ancestors of present-day Nigerians—that has appeared preoccupied with the connections between it and the outside world. Presumably this has to do with the way Nigeria came into being as a country. As a geopolitical entity it moved with time from the assortment of arbitrary territorial constructs of nineteenth-century colonialism, with European empires competing with each other, to the kind of globally standardized state format of the post–World War II, United Nations era.¹⁰ And the founding father of the country was really more of a stepfather: Frederick Lugard, eventually Lord Lugard, first governor of a united colonial Nigeria. The

very name “Nigeria” was proposed by his wife, Flora Shaw, colonial correspondent of the *Times* of London.

Lugard had had a zigzag (but upward) career in the service of the British Empire—through Uganda, Burma, and Hong Kong—so he developed a sense of colonial management, which he could use in Nigeria.¹¹ This was a huge territory, with an almost entirely indigenous population, and it required a low-cost form of imperialism. Consequently, Lugard adopted the principle of “indirect rule,” which may have been inspired by India, where the British had in fairly large part left maharajas and other old-style rulers to run many things in their established ways. In Nigeria it would mean identifying, and sometimes inventing, “native authorities,” and outsourcing local government to them, under the supervision of what was often a quite sparsely distributed corps of district officers.¹² This, for one thing, helped maintain into Nigerian independence a striking internal diversity, which probably made more difficult those typical steps toward shaping a national public culture, with shared symbolic forms, taken more effortlessly in a smaller, more homogeneous new state.

Naming could be part of such nation-building. Ex-French Soudan became Mali, ex-British Gold Coast became Ghana, ex-Nyasaland became Malawi, the ex-Rhodesias became Zambia and Zimbabwe. Nigeria remained what Flora Shaw named it. While Salisbury became Harare, Santa Isabel became Malabo, Lourenco Marques became Maputo, Leopoldville became Kinshasa, Fort Lamy became Ndjamena, and Bathurst became Banjul, one of Nigeria’s major cities is still Port Harcourt—named by Lugard after Lewis Vernon Harcourt, sometime secretary of state for the colonies. The name Lagos, of course, comes from the Portuguese.

Sports have tended to be a domain where nationalism flowers, even in countries where it may by now otherwise often be frowned on. Team sports as a kind of collective manifestation are particularly prominent here.¹³ To a degree, this works in Nigeria as well. The pride over the success of the national team the Super Eagles, football (soccer) gold medalists in the Olympic Games of 1994 in Atlanta, was manifest. Yet even here the imagination of Nigerians is likely to turn outward: personal success is shown in footballers’ migrations to Manchester United or Arsenal.¹⁴ The parlor walls of one of my best friends in Kafanchan, a successful local footballer, were covered with pictures of teams in the British Premier League.

In an upsurge of academic interest in nationalism in the 1980s, the historian Benedict Anderson (1983: 15–16)—with his own wide-ranging life story between Hong Kong, Britain, Ireland, Indonesia, and

upstate New York academia, but apparently without significant African landings—launched the notion of nations as “imagined communities.” Nations, he proposed, are “imagined,” as members would never know most compatriots personally. Yet they are “communities” because they are conceived as involving a deep, horizontal comradeship. They are “limited” because they have finite, if elastic, boundaries, with other nations lying beyond these. And it is also a part of the imagination that they are “sovereign.”

We may sense that Nigeria, in its history, has not matched these criteria particularly well. Centrifugal sociocultural forces were built into the construction of Nigeria. Boundaries have been arbitrary and weak on the ground; the imagination has often carried citizens yet further away; that deep comradeship has hardly been a strong widespread sentiment; sovereignty may have been celebrated, but only after the entity in question was created as part of an alien empire. Perhaps the nearest thing to a nation in an Andersonian sense, within what is now Nigerian territory, was for a short period Biafra, homeland of the Igbo. Or even more briefly, in 1966, the North, in turmoil after a first Southern-led military coup, with its battle cry of “*Araba!*” (secession). Some of the fiction portraying this period in all its complexity is discussed in chapter 15.

Instead of remaining within national boundaries, then, the real homeland of the imagination has thus been stretched out along that transcontinental cultural continuum. And this is not the land only of compatriots taken to be more or less like oneself, but a habitat that also includes more or less problematic Others: expatriates as well as people to whom one is oneself some kind of alien. The preoccupation with the outside could seem a bit surprising: usually it is larger countries that can best afford to turn mostly inward, and Nigeria is a large country.

Pan-Africanism, of the early variety linked not least to Kwame Nkrumah, also had great difficulty turning itself into a credible continent-wide alternative, in lands that continued to be divided between, not least, a Francophonie and an Anglophone Commonwealth. Whatever has been said in public oratory, these entities seemed to be enduring facts on the ground, in politics as well as in literature and popular culture. In Nigeria, moreover, there was always some sense of embarrassment that Nkrumah’s Ghana had made it into independence, out of the same empire, before its larger, more important neighbor a little distance away. In his late volume of autobiographical reminiscences, *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, Chinua Achebe (2009: 41) comments on the way this was dealt with, intellectually and politically: “True, Ghana had beaten us to it by three years, but then Ghana was

a tiny affair, compared to the huge lumbering giant called Nigeria. We did not have to be vociferous like Ghana; just our presence was enough.”

There is, of course, also the language factor. Nigerians speak hundreds of languages, most of them rather local. The national language is English, but as such, it is also British (and American, Canadian, Australian and so forth), as well as *the* dominant world language. It cannot serve as a distinctive national marker. Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba are spoken and understood by a great many people. But if you know one of these, it is less likely that you know another so well. Consequently, such literature as exists in these languages becomes regional, rather than national.¹⁵ (The same is true with regard to print news media.) For books, written and published in a national language that is also a world language, however, that keeps raising the question who they are actually for.¹⁶

The Afropolitans

Then in the twenty-first century come the Afropolitans. The term was evidently set in real motion through an essay named “Bye-Bye, Babar” by Taiye Selasi, herself born in London to a Ghanaian father and a Nigerian mother, and raised in Massachusetts, with university degrees from Yale and Oxford, launching her literary career with the novel *Ghana Must Go* (2013). The opening scene in the essay is from a London bar. The disc jockey spins a Fela Kuti remix. The whole scene, writes Selasi, “speaks of the cultural hybrid.” The people present are beautiful brown-skinned people, multilingual, people from law firms, street fairs, chem labs, art shows. These are Selasi’s Afropolitans, either born in Africa (anywhere on the continent, not necessarily Nigeria or West Africa) or the children of African transnational migrants. “They belong to no single geography but feel at home in many.”¹⁷ Even before that, however, “Afropolitanism” had been the title of an essay by the historian Achille Mbembe—born in Cameroun, with an academic career taking him through Europe and the United States to South Africa. Mbembe’s (2007) essay was locally published by a Johannesburg art gallery, and not so easily accessible. Yet he rooted his new concept more deeply in the extended past of the continent, pointing to both its internal openness and flux and its openness to the world.¹⁸

Selasi’s twentieth-century Afropolitans are people with personal success stories, in large part away from Africa, but Africa means something to them, and it is not just poverty, wars, or disasters. They

are engaged in creating other Africas, and other connections between Africa and the world. For one thing, they are prominent in writing: apart from Selasi herself, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Teju Cole (to mention two with Nigerian roots) are clearly among them. Adichie's bestseller *Americanah* (2013) is a study in Afropolitanism. We get to it in chapter 17.

Yet about the notion of Afropolitanism there has already been some controversy. I am not surprised—the notion of “palaver” has deep historical roots in West Africa. How long the term will be a part of the current vocabulary perhaps remains to be seen. In Taiye Selasi's original version, there may have been an elitist streak. Partly for that reason, it has been suggested that it should be used in the plural, as “Afropolitanisms,” to signal that there are many kinds; that, of course, has also been argued for “cosmopolitanisms,” in another, related, debate.¹⁹

Anyhow, I would suggest that the term is now in the domain of intellectual commons, and I will take a certain liberty with it here. Rather than engaging with ongoing debates over Afropolitanism in its current forms, mostly among literary scholars, I will use it as a term with extended time depth, more in line with Achille Mbembe's original discussion: to sum up, with a convenient single word, involvements of West Africa with the outside world, past and present. These are involvements going back to the horrors of the seventeenth century transatlantic slave trade, and then passing through many phases into the twenty-first century. Looking eastward, there has been the wish of Muslims to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. In a way, this part of Africa was Afropolitan before it became Nigeria.

Again, for Selasi and many commentators, the Afropolitans may be people of today's world. They are in it at a time when the New Yam Festival is celebrated not only in Igboland, where Chinua Achebe described it in *Things Fall Apart*, but in Birmingham, England, as well as in New York and New Orleans. Yet this generation seems to me to be conceptually the descendants (children or grandchildren) of the been-tos: more sophisticated than these forerunners, a jet set not so inclined to be permanently returnees, but moving back and forth between continents.²⁰ Nevertheless, they continue to be a part of the long-term engagement with the world, along that historical continuum of creolization and hybridity.

With that longitudinal view, I think one can also discern a certain shift in centers of gravity. With the early been-tos there is a quite strong sense of the rather durable soft power of colonialism. Selasi still places her bar scene in London, and Bernardine Evaristo, winner of the 2019

Booker Prize with her lively but mostly London-based *Girl, Woman, Other*, is identified as “Anglo-Nigerian.” Over time, nevertheless, I think there has been a drift on the -politan end of the continuum, from Britain to the United States. Already in 1947, speaking at New York City Hall, one of the pioneers in this change could reminisce about early practices: “Twenty years ago, whenever I visited New York City on a short trip from my university, and found it uneconomic to seek for a house to pass the night, I learned from experience how to pass a comfortable night in the subways, so generously placed at the disposal of guests and residents of the city, for the nominal charge of a nickel!” This was Nnamdi Azikiwe, later to become Nigeria’s first president.²¹

The engagements of Nigerians with America (and to a degree Americans with Nigeria) are discussed particularly in chapters 16, 17, and 19. But there is certainly some variety in transcontinental linkages. In times of coups and military regimes, the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, southwest of London, was also an important place in this Afropolitan landscape because of the training it had given Nigerian officers. Moreover, those soccer stars could probably be Afropolitans, too. Not to speak of the members of the Nigerian women’s bobsled team in the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea—they were from Houston and Dallas, Texas, and St. Paul, Minnesota.²²

Then, with regard to the latest generation of Nigerians and other West Africans moving around across borders, one should keep in mind the fact that theirs are not all stories of successful careers, between New York and London on one side and Lagos and Accra on the other. They are also among the struggling traders between the markets of Guangzhou in China and Onitsha on the River Niger.²³ They are among the young Southern Nigerian women recruited by criminal networks to work the streets of Europe.²⁴ And they are among the boat refugees trying to make it from Africa to Europe on unsafe vessels across the Mediterranean.²⁵

Even beyond that, however, I will let my notion of “Afropolitan horizons” extend as far as to moments when no physical border-crossing is actually involved, but when the imagination somehow takes in aliens, and the outside world—in later chapters, when the peers of an aging Hausa woman at the mid-twentieth century warn her that the foreigners may fly her away out of Kano Airport; or when, in the midst of a civil war, the sympathies of distant countries are made to matter, and a white priest turns out to be a foreign mercenary.

Clearly Nigerian writing has not been evenly distributed over the country, in terms of the background of writers, or in terms of topics

and scenes. There has been a continuous preoccupation with Lagos as a difficult, yet oddly attractive place—in no small part due to its openness to the world, one of the home towns of Afropolitans. In this book, the Lagos focus is represented particularly in chapters 5 and 9. But in chapter 6 I also try to map some other significant Southern Nigerian sites of literary history, and chapters 12 and 13 offer at least glimpses of Northern Nigeria. Then chapter 18 follows two Afropolitan travelers on their return journeys through the entire country. Continuously, it is an important point that even as you go inland, outside connections keep appearing, keep being handled.

Before that, chapters 16 and 17 are about Nigerians' encounters with the United States. And then in chapter 19 the gaze is reversed, as Black Americans engage with a West African heritage, retrieved or reinvented.

Literary Anthropology: Studying Sideways

Reviewing the social anthropology of West Africa in 1985, Keith Hart (who had himself done early urban ethnography in Nima, a ramshackle suburb of Accra) noted some of the weaknesses of description in academic writing, and went on to point out that

in the 1960s a dazzling creative literature arose which ought to be seen as part of the region's anthropology No social anthropologist set out to emulate Turgenev; but the West African novel brought a whole new perspective to our understanding of what makes the region's peoples unique. Perhaps in time something of that distinctive voice will rub off on our ethnographic literature. (Hart 1985: 254–255)²⁶

It so happened that just after Hart wrote, anthropologists (not only West Africanists) indeed started to pay more attention to how they wrote. In a very multifaceted development over the time since then, something now referred to as “literary anthropology” has become a lively part of the discipline.²⁷ It takes varied forms: turning ethnography into something less like conventional academic styles, more like creative nonfiction; autoethnography, placing the anthropologist's own life story in a wider context; reflexive field work accounts, portraying the personal experience of immersion in a field; and other kinds—but also the anthropological study of literature itself, as finished texts as well as a kind of life and work, set in its social context.²⁸ Frequently this involves drawing on field research in inspecting and commenting on literary work.

This is what I attempt to do in the chapters that follow. It is a memoir of one reader's encounters with writings, and occasionally and briefly with writers as well—not very respectful of the boundaries of established genres and disciplines. I am a fan of Nigerian writing, but a stranger to the conventions of literary scholarship. I am in a continuous back-and-forth movement between texts and what I know in other ways, from personal experience and from field study. What follows is not a study of Kafanchan, but a set of essays where this town appears here and there as a point of departure for further commentary. It also means that I approach texts as an anthropologist—not as a literary theorist or reviewer, who may be looking for other things and making other kinds of judgment. For one thing, people can appear in fiction as members of their classes or ethnic groups, but beyond that as multifaceted personalities. Not everybody in real life will have as dramatic and complicated experiences as Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* or Okey Ndibe's *Ikechukwu*, yet the scenes through which they pass draw on recognizably Nigerian localities and passages.

I would expect most of my readers to be outside Nigeria, without much prior local knowledge: socially, culturally, politically, historically, geographically. But I would certainly be happy to have some Nigerian readers as well. The Nigerian literary and scholarly scene is well-developed and internally lively, and it is natural that most cultural commentators will do their observing and reflecting where they are at home.²⁹ Yet from the stance of transnational openness, which is a theme of the book, I hope there is also room for some interested outsiders like me.

My focus is on Nigerian writers over approximately a seventy-year period, from the late colonial 1950s to the present. Mostly they are fiction writers—although as public intellectuals, some of these have also discussed Nigerian society in nonfiction texts. Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka are obvious examples. A handful of these writers, including the two just mentioned, have come to be included in an emergent Nigerian literary canon, in terms of literary quality and public attention, and have drawn a very large part of the academic and critical commentary on Nigerian literature. My objective is not so much to contribute to that sort of study, with a focus on those same authors and their main works, although they do show up in what follows as well. I drop in here and there in the entire landscape of writing, rather, to assemble a view of Nigerian life and the Nigerian imagination.

It is another aspect of my kind of literary anthropology that it moves, at times, between fiction and other kinds of writing. Moreover, it draws on a border-crossing combination of insider and outsider

writings: in this case, Nigerian fiction (and some other Nigerian social commentary) on the one hand, and certain writings by expatriate colonial officials, journalists, and fiction writers with their long-term bases elsewhere, as well as anthropologists, on the other; see not least chapters 2, 3, 4, 8, and 12. I see them as throwing light on each other, even as literary scholars mostly do not engage with the latter types of writings. Taken together, this becomes a network of perspectives toward Nigerian life as it has shifted over time: approximately from Charles Dickens's imagined Borrioboola-Gha (in chapter 4) to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, and beyond.

This approach also relates to a certain debate largely elsewhere in anthropology's past. In a classic essay of academic rethinking, Laura Nader (1972) argued that anthropologists had mostly engaged in studying people less powerful and prosperous than themselves—that is, studying down—and now the time had come to study up. (Colonial anthropology, obviously, had tended to be studying down, inspecting “the natives.”) Nader's proposal drew much sympathy. Yet perhaps in the long run, the actual outcome has not been so impressive. For one thing, anthropologists like to study groups they can sympathize with, and they are often not so sure they will do that when studying up. For another, there is a question of access. Powerful people can more easily close their doors: “Dogs and Ethnographers Not Allowed.”

As for myself, I have been inclined to study sideways: taking an interest in other groups of people involved in knowledge production—in large part transnationally, although perhaps with different interests, under other constraints. Frequently these are people whom anthropologists are for one reason or other irritated with, in whose work they are inclined to find faults. Perhaps they are often right in this, but it may also be useful to approach such groups as field-working anthropologists usually expect to do, with a fair amount of respect and willingness to learn. In a way, looking back, I would see that as a part of my general stance toward anthropology. No discipline is an island, or it shouldn't be.

Along such lines, I have studied sideways among news media foreign correspondents (more about this in chapter 8), and I have scrutinized the texts of writers producing global future scenarios, and the reception of these texts.³⁰ I see my interest in writings from and about Nigeria, by novelists and other non-anthropologists, in the same light.

Again, literary anthropology tends to involve a certain blurring of conventional genre boundaries. Such blurring, too, may keep showing up in unexpected ways. A decade before Keith Hart's comments on West African anthropology, in 1974, the journal *Africa* offered an

article on “Social Anthropology in Nigeria during the Colonial Period,” a retrospective account by G. I. Jones, former district officer turned anthropologist. (This journal was the organ of the International Africa Institute, an organization launched by Frederick Lugard after he returned from Nigeria to Britain.) Jones’s article can still offer irritations, amusements, and insights, but this paragraph is relevant to the perspective of the present book:

To the average Ibo villager, an anthropologist is someone who knows more about Ibo traditional culture than he does himself. Any monograph written by an anthropologist on a particular tribe and accessible to its literate members becomes the tribal Bible, the charter of its traditional history and culture Today it is the novelists and playwrights who describe the culture and institutions and the historians who try to record the oral tradition, and it is in this field that anthropology has most to answer for, since the oral tradition of many of these Southern Nigerian communities has completely absorbed, and been corrupted by, the myths of the anthropologists. (Jones 1974: 287)

Jones and Hart were both anthropologists with Cambridge connections, to a university department with a high profile in West African studies. But if there is only that decade between their respective comments, there is more like an academic generation between them—and they seem to point in opposite directions. Hart suggests that anthropologists should be inspired by those novelists, while Jones portrays the Nigerian novelists and playwrights as dependent on the early expatriate anthropologists.³¹

One may suspect that Jones exaggerates a bit, yet his view could stimulate our curiosity about just how those more or less Afropolitan writers, from Ben Okri to Chigozie Obioma and beyond, come by their understandings of indigenous Nigerian thought worlds, and how much of such understandings in their writings is importantly shaped by their own creativity. Did they learn about such matters at the dinner table, from their usually well-educated parents? Or in the visits to home villages, during the long holidays? Or did they indeed read about them?

Our curiosity here may be intensified by the fact that a number of recent writers of Nigerian background have moved on from the social realism of the early postcolonial generation of novelists to something more like a magical realism, where transnational migrants of flesh and blood mingle with somewhat amorphous spirits.³²

There is an interesting instance here in Chigozie Ogioma’s novel *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019), very well received by critics, with the central figure migrating from his small hometown setting in Nigerian Igboland to Cyprus, and then back—remarkably with that central

figure's guardian spirit as narrator. Chigozie Ogioma himself is an Afropolitan of today's version, currently teaching creative writing at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. He grew up in Nigeria, although not actually in the homelands of his ethnic group. We come back to him briefly in chapter 18. In an “author's note” on sources at the end of his novel, Obioma (2019: 445–446) acknowledges the early influence of his mother in discussing the Igbo spiritual world, and notes that he also drew on his father's and his own local field research in Igboland, and on several Nigerian written sources, including writings by Chinua Achebe.³³ But then, he points out, he was able to also use an early anthropological report on the Igbo, published in 1913–14 by the British anthropologist Northcote W. Thomas. We can learn from one historian of anthropology that the British colonial administration at the time regarded that same Thomas as a difficult and eccentric figure (Mills 2008: 51). As people inserting themselves in social space between the locals and the expatriate representatives of the empire, some number of field-working anthropologists those days experienced something like that.

This may be the point to say something about the state of anthropology at that later time, when G. I. Jones wrote about its influence on Nigerian literature. It was in a period when the relationship between anthropology and Nigeria, and much of Africa, was not so great. Historically, anthropology as a scholarly discipline had developed most strongly in countries with overseas empires—Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium—and in a period of postcolonialism, it could seem tainted by such imperial connections.³⁴ The new African universities tended to establish departments of sociology, regarded as a more modern discipline, and anthropologists adapted at this stage by discreetly finding their homes in these. Meanwhile, in Britain and elsewhere, the imperial past became for some time a preoccupation of postcolonial anthropology, perhaps with overtones of an ivory tower intergenerational conflict.³⁵ At the same time, it may be worth noting, as some Nigerian students found that anthropology could be a discipline to their liking, they crossed the Atlantic to be trained in the United States. (We come to one example in chapter 3.)

Reading Nigeria: The Bookstores

During my research periods in Kafanchan, I would usually stay at the Rosy Guest Inn. It was a small, one-story building under a zinc roof, with a courtyard in the middle and rooms around it—very ordinary

small-town Nigerian architecture. As it turned out, the Nigerian Army, never fully demobilizing after the Biafra War, had placed something like a battalion in Kafanchan, and consequently its officers took over much of the available, more desirable accommodation. So Rosy Guest Inn became the solution to my housing problem.

It also became one of my entry points to town life. While I remained for an extended period, most of the guests came for overnight stays or short periods: ginger traders, witchcraft and sorcery experts, soldiers who just wanted to escape from boredom for a day or night of feasting. My small typewriter was the only one in the house (this was before the era of laptop computers), so I would occasionally help by typing out a new copy of the dining room menu.

I also got to know the proprietor. The owner of Rosy Guest Inn was a hard-working entrepreneur from the south of the country. He was only part-time in Kafanchan, as he also ran another Rosy Guest Inn in Kaduna, some two hundred kilometers away, where he had his family. So he would be moving between these establishments regularly on a rickety old motorcycle. Later on, he established yet another Rosy Guest Inn in Zaria. (It was staying there once, briefly, that I learned from my transistor radio of Ronald Reagan's election to the U.S. presidency.)

But that was not all. In Kafanchan as well as Kaduna, he ran book and stationery stores, under the name of Nakowa Bookshop. I would go to Nakowa daily, at least for my copy of the *New Nigerian*, the leading newspaper of Northern Nigeria. I could get the major national newspaper, the *Daily Times*, there as well, and the weekly *Lagos Weekend* (purveyor of capital city gossip and scandal), and other weekly and monthly magazines more haphazardly. The assortment of books was actually limited. I learned from my friend the owner that most of his book business involved contracts for textbooks with local schools. There was also some competition with another small bookshop, a hole-in-the-wall establishment run by a man who had learned something about the trade working in a mission bookstore in a larger town.

Part of my encounter with Nigerian writing thus came from these stores in Kafanchan: some books from the few Nigerian publishers, some imports—mostly of Heinemann's African Writers Series, which had a pioneer role in offering outlets for writers from many parts of the continent, or from the less acclaimed Fontana Books, publishing the mostly rather short novels of a certain set of other authors.³⁶

Kafanchan, then, also provided an important context for my engagement with Nigerian writing. Browsing in bookstores is really part of field work in literary anthropology. Some bookstores here and there in the world become famous and get books written about

them. For me, Nakowa deserves at least these few lines. Early visits to Lagos would then take me to the CMS Bookshop, in Broad Street. The acronym stands for Church Missionary Society—but though it was an Anglican mission enterprise, it had a rather wide assortment.

Visiting Nigerian bookstores, it is true, hopeful readers might not always have found much chance of browsing. Okey Ndibe (2016: 118), whose writing career would later take him to the United States, and the pleasure of finding bookstores there equipped with couches and coffee counters, would reminisce that, in the late 1980s in Nigeria, “few, if any, bookstores would allow a wandering customer to thumb through the pages for more than a few seconds. Books belonged on shelves.”

Keeping somewhat in touch with West African culture and literature, however, has not always required traveling to West Africa. For a very long time, I subscribed to the weekly *West Africa*, somewhat officious, now defunct, but then published in London from an address near Fleet Street.³⁷ In the 1960s and 1970s, going to London regularly, I would find much available in the better bookstores: Foyles certainly (a multistory establishment, which in its apparent unconcern with turnover could exhibit the same books, and very likely the same copies of sometimes obscure titles, on its shelves year after year), but further down on Charing Cross Road, Collet’s was the bookstore of leftist politics, which also meant that it was strong on the Third World and its remaining independence movements.³⁸ In Great Russell Street, opposite the British Museum, there was Kegan Paul, Trench & Trubner, fairly old-fashioned “Oriental and African” booksellers. Dillon’s in Bloomsbury was in an academic neighborhood and carried scholarly literature as well as a wide range of fiction. At one point or other there would also appear some small bookshop, more specialized, probably in an outer borough, and catering above all to a reading public among the Black British. Writing aside, one could go Stern’s Radio at the upper end of Tottenham Court Road for records of West African music: highlife or whatever.

Elsewhere, there were other establishments to which I would return when opportunities arose. In New York’s Greenwich Village, the University Place Bookshop was strong on African studies; in Paris there was the Presence Africaine store in Rue des Écoles (focusing on the Francophonie, connecting more to Dakar than to Lagos).

As Nigerian writers have entered world literature, now one need no longer look for their works only in specialized establishments. Go into a good bookstore almost anywhere, look for the alphabetized shelf for international fiction, and almost immediately you may see “Achebe, Chinua,” and then “Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi.”

Of course, the assortment of bookstores has changed over time. Some have closed; others have shifted form almost beyond recognition. Furthermore, there have been signs of change in the more or less transnational publishing industry. For a long time, it was an unhappy circumstance that the books of writers who found publishers abroad (again, being in English) and drew the interest of the outside world could be out of reach for most Nigerian readers. They were too expensive, or simply not locally available. The writers who published at home, on the other hand, were invisible elsewhere.

Now all that seems to be changing. By 2017, a Weekend Arts section of the *New York Times* could carry a headline proclaiming “Nigeria’s Literary New Wave.” The article identifies a new set of writers—Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, Ladipo Manyika, Leye Adenle, Ayobami Adebayo, and Elnathan John, all evidently more or less Afropolitan. The publishing scene is also changing. Faber and Faber in London has been there all along, presenting Nigerian writers from Amos Tutuola to Teju Cole. But the *New York Times* article points to the important role of Cassava Republic Press, remarkably based in Abuja, in trying to fill the gap between local and international publishing (Alter 2017). At much the same time, on the other hand, an American academic press could offer a monograph by Adélekè Adéèkó (2017), professor of African Studies and English at Ohio State University, which concludes that the current style of Nigerian book launch events, often involving more or less ghostwritten autobiographies by eminent individuals and published sometimes as vanity press ventures, has come to draw significantly on an established but protean tradition of rites of passage: speech-making, donations, praise singers, and more. So all that may now be another part of that same open but ever-changing Afropolitan, creolizing continuum of cultural diffusion and creativity that, again with some back-and-forth movement, stretches between New York, London, Lagos, and Kafanchan.

Notes

1. It is true that some of the major contributions so far have been by other expatriates, such as Griswold (2000), Newell (2006) and Lindfors (e.g., 2010). I am well aware that I say little or nothing about some important, in certain cases very productive, writers: S. A. Aluko, Gabriel Okara, Ben Okri, Chris Abani, Festus Iyayi In particular, I know that there is not much in these pages about some women writers, such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, or, more recently, Ayobami Adebayo or Bernardine Evaristo. Other commentators will be better equipped than I am to deal

with them. See, for example, Paula Uimonen's (2020) lively study of the life, work, and lasting influence of Flora Nwapa. I say hardly anything about children's literature, although some of Nigeria's best-known writers have contributed to this field as well—probably because such texts have been used extensively in schools. Moreover, I deal only with prose writings, and not at all with drama, although that would include important early writings by Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, and Obi Egbuna. Finally, while these essays stretch over a considerable time period, they do not take into account a development that may become increasingly important in the future of writing and publishing: the digital media (see, e.g., Uimonen 2019).

2. For a wider retrospective view of my life as an anthropologist, including my Nigerian experience, see Hannerz 2019.
3. I portray Kafanchan briefly, with some emphasis on matters of literacy and media use, in my book *Cultural Complexity* (Hannerz 1992: 22–26), and, by way of introduction, in *Transnational Connections* (Hannerz 1996: 1–2). For more detailed discussions of my field research methods there, see Hannerz 1976 and 1982; for some comments on Kafanchan in the context of center-periphery relationships and creolization, see Hannerz 1989; and for a retrospective view of my field study and the turn to studying transnational linkages, see Hannerz 2022.
4. During much of the period I am involved with, the more common spelling was “Ibo,” but as “Igbo” is now the more common form, I use that throughout (except in quotes when “Ibo” is used in the original).
5. I dwell on the uses of the terms “globalization” and “transnational” at greater length in my book *Transnational Connections* (Hannerz 1996).
6. For my earlier discussions of creolization concepts, see especially Hannerz 1987 and 1996: 65–78. The early article by Fabian (1978) on African popular culture influenced me especially. My linguist colleagues in Washington had been impressed not least by the work of Lorenzo Dow Turner, discussed in chapter 19.
7. For a view of the debate over the uses of creolization concepts, see the volume edited by Charles Stewart (2007). See also the comparative study of creolizations, drawing on materials from many places, by Cohen and Sheringham (2016). On the uses of creolization ideas for political theory, see Gordon 2014.
8. As a traveling concept, moving out from its region of origin to a wider use for comparative purposes, “caste” has arrived in Nigeria, too, applying to the *osu* category of shrine servants in traditional Igbo religion: note the case of Clara, a young woman of *osu* background, as depicted by Chinua Achebe in *No Longer at Ease*, in chapter 7. There are references to the *osu* in *Things Fall Apart* as well.
9. On early Nigerian television comedy, see, e.g., Oreh 1985.
10. On the global standardization of mid-twentieth-century states, see Meyer 1999.
11. For an extensive biography of nearly half a century of Lugard's life, with a wealth of information of his Nigerian activities and experiences, see Perham 1960.

12. Murray Last (1970) offers an illuminating review of four historical phases of administration and dissent in Hausaland, from the precolonial through the colonial period into early Nigerian independence. For a critical and comparative analysis of indirect rule and related forms of colonial government in Africa, see Mahmood Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject* (1996)—by a prominent political scientist whose transnational academic career has stretched between Makerere University in Kampala and Columbia University in New York. Mamdani describes indirect rule of the colonial Nigerian type as “decentralized despotism.” See also the view of indirect rule in Nigeria and its later consequences by a Ghanaian (later Canada-based) observer, Ato Quayson (1994).
13. On this, see Gingrich and Hannerz 2017: 17–18.
14. According to one interview, Aliko Dangote—with a family background in groundnut and kola nut trade, later with what amounted to a national monopoly in cement production, recently apparently the hundredth richest person in the world—has hoped to buy Arsenal, the London football club, his favorite team (Pilling 2018).
15. I will not engage with literature in other languages than English here (with the one exception of discussing one Swedish-language book in chapter 1). Probably the best-known examples of Nigerian non-English literature are the mid-twentieth-century writings in Yoruba of Chief Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa, a source of inspiration for, among others, Amos Tutuola (see Lindfors 2010: 65–74). It is true, too, that some of the early Onitsha pamphleteering—see chapter 6—was in Igbo. On attempts to stimulate writing in Hausa from the late colonial period onward, see Furniss 2006. In a later period, particularly in the 1980s, a “Hausa Literary Movement” developed; on the links between that, radio broadcasts, and the home video industry, see Adamu 2002. At least in part this overlaps with what has been described as “Kano Market Literature,” a *soyayya* genre of popular romance, seen by some as a counterpart of the Onitsha publishing industry. As far as print news media in regional Nigerian languages are concerned, the Hausa-language newspaper, *Gaskiya ta fi Kwabo*, may have been the best known.
16. The question whether African novels in world languages have to be seen as “extroverted” was raised by Eileen Julien (2006); about a decade later, Nathan Suhr-Sytsma (2018) has concluded that they can now be seen as on the whole neither inward-turning nor outward-turning, but as “multifocal.” This also has to do with an increasingly multilocal publishing industry.
17. Shifting to elsewhere in the conceptual landscape, we could sense that some of these Afropolitans are what have been somewhat dubiously called “third culture kids,” children raised not wholly in their parents’ culture of origin, and not really in the local culture of the place where they find themselves, but rather in some hybrid of the two. They tend to be products of reasonably comfortable expatriate childhoods. While the term has become popular, it is theoretically somewhat antiquated.
18. In later writings, Achille Mbembe has also connected his notion of Afropolitanism more to earlier Francophone writers and to diaspora

concepts. While several of these publications are in French, the early (2007) essay remains the most often cited, and has also been republished as Mbembe 2020, thus rendered more accessible.

19. In one illuminating later discussion, Eze (2014: 240) has suggested that an Afropolitan is “that human being on the African continent or of African descent who has realized that her identity can no longer be explained in purist, essentialist, and oppositional terms or by reference only to Africa.” For more on the debate, see Ede 2016, Gehrman 2016, and a thematic issue of the *European Journal of English Studies* (Durán-Almarza, Kabir, and González 2017). A recent user of the concept is Harris (2020), who sticks to a more specifically literary understanding and focuses on South African writing. In anthropology, Ryan Skinner (2015) has promoted a concept of Afropolitanism in his study of popular music in Mali, *Bamako Sounds*—without mentioning Taiye Selasi, and drawing more on Achille Mbembe’s writings.

A related term, “Afropean,” appeared already in the early 1990s, according to Black British writer Johny Pitts (2019: 1), who uses it to cover his reporting on Black Europe.

I have discussed the varieties of cosmopolitanisms elsewhere (Hannerz 2004a; 2016: 170–176). Eze, in the paper referred to above, draws partly on my view.

20. I note that James Hodapp (2016), writing about the early 1990s novel *Yoruba Girl Dancing* by Simi Bedford as a “proto-Afropolitan Bildungsroman,” also makes the historical connection between been-tos and Afropolitans.
21. This is from a collection of Azikiwe’s (1961) speeches. “Zik” attended several of the historically Black academic institutions for periods of varied length, but he was mostly at Lincoln University, Pennsylvania—from which, a little later on, Kwame Nkrumah would also graduate.

From about the same time as this New York speech by Azikiwe is the book *Without Bitterness* (1944) by Nwafor Orizu, Igbo of aristocratic origin, student in the United States, and an ardent follower of Azikiwe. Published in the United States as World War II was coming to an end, it is rather gently anticolonialist, pro-American, and critical of the British in a tone that goes with the title of the book. Orizu returned to Nigeria and had a prominent part in politics between the achievement of independence and the first military coup, but was otherwise most active in education.

22. On this, see the report in the *New York Times* (Rich and Akinwotu 2018).
23. On African traders in China, see Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2017.
24. On the recent transnational Nigerian sex trade, see Ellis 2016: 180–187 and the report by the journalist Ben Taub (2017) for the *New Yorker*.
25. See Andersson 2014 on the passage from West Africa to Europe, especially by way of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. For a brief study exemplifying the spread of Nigerians in Europe, under differing circumstances, see Andrikopoulos 2013 on communities in the Netherlands and Greece. DeWitte (2019), touching in passing on the “Afropolitan” concept, offers an interesting view of the establishment of an African identity in the Netherlands, although most of the West African migrants there are from Ghana rather than Nigeria. Their encounters there with

- the longer-settled Surinamese seem somewhat similar to those between African migrants, Caribbean migrants, and local Afro-Americans in the United States. See chapters 16, 17, and chapter 19, note 3.
26. A slightly later retrospective overview of the anthropology of West Africa by Elizabeth Tonkin (1990) is especially enlightening on the British colonial tradition. See also chapter 1, note 5.
 27. While much more could be said about the field of literary anthropology, a handful of references may exemplify its diversity and growth: Archetti 1994; Brettell 2015; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fassin 2014; Gottlieb 2015; Narayan 2007; Waterston and Vesperi 2009; and Wulff 2016, 2017. Reed-Danahay (1997) offers an early overview of the varied uses of the term “autoethnography,” showing its links to the history of anthropology.
 28. One of the pioneer contributions to a literary anthropology actually resulted from a field study in Nigeria: *Return to Laughter* (1954), written under the pseudonym “Elenore Smith Bowen” by Laura Bohannan, based on her field experience among the Tiv. I say a little more about this in chapter 13.
 29. I include here also scholars of Nigerian background, now active in U.S. academia—see, e.g., Adesokan 2011 and Eze 2011.
 30. For my other endeavors in “studying sideways,” see Hannerz 2004b on the work and life of foreign correspondents, and Hannerz 2016 on the genre of future scenarios. In an earlier essay launching the notion, I also identify missionaries and spies as occupational categories engaged in transnational knowledge production (Hannerz 1998).
 31. Later on, Rhonda Cobham (2016), literary scholar of Caribbean background, has argued that the early generation of Nigerian novelists were under the influence of anthropological writing—in some instances perhaps by way of personal contacts with amateur or professional anthropologists, but also because such writings as they came across about their own societies were often by anthropologists. If some of their novels were fairly rich in ethnography, of course, it may also have been because a readership that was in large part abroad may have needed such cultural contextualization of the plot, and was interested in it. On the relationship between early Nigerian fiction and anthropology, within a context of postcolonial critique, see also Huggan 2001: 34–57.

For a broader, critical view of the relationship between mid-twentieth-century African fiction and social science, see an essay by Simon Gikandu (2016), Kenyan-American literary scholar. It is amusing to learn, from the prominent African American literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1992: 88), in an essay in his *Loose Canons*, that both Wole Soyinka and Emmanuel Obiechina—see chapter 6—had told him that at Cambridge University they had somehow had to identify with social anthropology, in an early period when that center of learning did not yet recognize African literature as an academic field.

On the relationship between anthropology and fiction (and semifiction), see also the perceptive analysis by Quayson (2003: 1–30), focusing on Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* (1992). Ghosh, a highly productive

- Indian author; also has an Oxford doctorate in anthropology. See, too, chapter 1, note 5.
32. Another recent example of Nigerian-American fiction inspired by traditional cosmology is Akwaeke Emezi's first novel, *Freshwater* (2018), with complicated spiritual beings taking their place in a tricontinental family life.
 33. I had my own encounter with Obioma at a public appearance in Stockholm, as a translation of *An Orchestra of Minorities* into Swedish was launched. Before that, I was intrigued to learn, from an essay in the *New York Times Book Review* (Obioma 2018), that during his childhood in Akure, his father had turned him on to reading by handing him a well-worn copy of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. So here was an Igbo boy, in what was largely a Yoruba town, finding his way to literature by way of a pioneer Yoruba author who could give him a sense of how to draw creatively on Nigerian oral tradition. Then, as the next step, Obioma's father took his son to a public library.
 34. American anthropology had another kind of beginning, with a concentration, until after World War II, on studies of Amerindian cultures. Other settler countries with indigenous people in their territories have followed a similar pattern.
 35. A key volume here was *Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter* (1973), edited by Talal Asad—not a volume, however, where Nigeria figures very importantly.
 36. On the history of the African Writers Series, see Currey 2008 and Oloko 2016. James Currey edited the series for a number of years, together with Chinua Achebe. Adewale Maja-Pearce (see chapter 18) came in as series editor later.
 37. See Derrick's (2018) monograph on the historical role of the weekly *West Africa*, focusing on its first editor, Albert Cartwright.
 38. At Collet's in the 1960s, one would also find, for instance, the publications from *Umkhonto na Zikwe*, the armed wing of Nelson Mandela's African National Congress.

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